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ABSTRACT

The concept of parent involvement in the school curriculum has been evolving over a period of years. As schools become more sophisticated in the education of children, they must become correspondingly more sophisticated in working with the parents of the children. A High-Active Parent Invovlement Program involves administrators, teachers, parents, and students. One part of that program is the daily "public relations package" known as homework. Homework is a human bridge between the possibilities of the school and the realities of the home. This paper presents strategies through which administrators and teachers can use homework as a public relations tool to obtain greater parental involvement, that will in turn lead to greater student achievement and positive attitudes toward the school and the teacher. Appendixes include a parent involvement continuum and a checklist for parents. (CB)

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Homework: The human relations bridge between school and home

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Running head: HOMEWORK

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Homework: The human relations bridge between school and home

Lay citizen participation in curriculum development is not necessarily a new idea. School districts committed to quality education have long recognized the importance of citizen involvement in school curriculum. When lay citizens understand and feel a part of the decision-making process, meaningful and long-term curriculum changes can occur with great precision (Doll, 1978; Hunkins, 1980).

Curriculum experts who have guided school districts in curriculum activities generally agree that lay citizen participation is necessary. These same experts have stressed that the issues are the extent and the method of involvement and not whether lay citizens should be involved. As we observe greater stress being placed on lay citizen involvement in curriculum development, the role and responsibility of the family in public education has emerged as one of the significant issues in the 1980s. Specifically, the question being raised is: what is the responsibility of parents in their child's education? Theoretically and practically, homework is a "daily public relations" package from the school to the students and parents. This daily package is a human relations bridge between the possibilities of the school and the realities of the home.

The need for parental involvement

In the main, the literature reveals that both parents and school officials desire greater parent-school interaction. Recent findings show interesting trends about parent involvement in the school. Epstein (1983) reported that (1) generally, parents have positive attitudes about their child's school and teacher. Yet, (2) many parents receive few or no communications from the school. (3) Few parents are involved in the school. (4) Most parents believe that schools could do more to involve parents in learning activities at home that would benefit their child. One of the most interesting findings is that (5) teachers who work at parent involvement and family communications are considered better teachers as compared to those teachers who are isolated from families of children they teach.

It is overwhelmingly apparent that schools must deal with the issues of breadth and depth of parental involvement in curriculum development. The essential question facing school districts is: how can the school assist parents in becoming more involved in their children's education? Homework appears to be one place to start since it is a clear direct link between the school and home.

Developing a well-defined stance on parent involvement

As simple or routine as it might sound, many school districts need to establish a clear and succinct policy on parental involvement. Many schools and parents are unsure about the district's position on the kind and degree of parent involvement necessary in curriculum development activities. Issuing a declaration for all patrons in the school district will foster and promote parental involvement as an

important concept. This statement or series of statements can and should deal with the (1) scope of parent involvement in the school district, (2) method of parent involvement, and (3) strategies for evaluating parental involvement in the school curriculum.

School districts may find a variety of documents to articulate this stance: (1) school goals, (2) school district philosophy, (3) school board policy, (4) curriculum guide, and/or (5) student handbook. These documents should clarify the school district's position on parental involvement as it relates to the school curriculum and illustrate how parents can become involved in curriculum development activities.

Classifying and clarifying the kind of parental involvement program which is being utilized or desired

One of the most important tasks of school districts is the classification of the kind of parent involvement program being employed or that is desired in the school district. This group activity should involve teachers, administrators, students, parents, patrons and school board members. Classifying the type of parental involvement is an important step in the total process of curriculum development. To do this, the school district must recognize that parental involvement falls along a continuum.[1] The continuum has three categories: low-passive, moderate-active, and high-active (Appendix A).

The Low-Passive Parent Involvement Program is passive because there is no overt attempt by the school district to get the parents involved in school curriculum activities. School-parent contact is minimal. Report cards are used to report student progress and reporting periods provide the opportunity for teachers to confer with parents about the child's progress. Occasional telephone conferencing is used when situations require more extensive contact with the parent. A school parent-teacher organization is integrated into the total school structure. A wide range of issues are dealt with by the organization. Generally, curriculum issues and the teaching of children in the home are not covered in great detail by this body. In most cases, homework only becomes an issue when one or two teachers become concerned and place a greater emphasis on homework than other teachers at the building level.

[1] Not all school districts will fall precisely into one category or another on the continuum. Generally, the degree of commitment that school districts demonstrate is represented in each of the categories.

The Moderate-Active Parent Involvement Program suggests that the school district is involving parents on a limited but systematic basis. In addition to the typical forms of parental contact, parent aide programs are created. In parent aide programs, parents are asked to volunteer as classroom aides, cafeteria monitors, library assistants, and playground supervisors. In addition, teacher-prescribed parent home activities are stressed. Parents are encouraged to help their child at home with school-related assignments. In addition to other school issues, the parent-teacher organization focuses on curricular issues and the responsibility of educating children in the home with the help of the school.

The High-Active Parent Involvement Program represents a school district which has an aggressive parent involvement program. In addition to activities of parental contact which involves report cards, school-based conferences, telephone contacts, parent-teacher organization and parent aide program, the school district has broad array of programs that are aimed at involving parents in the school curriculum. These programs include: home-based teacher-parent conferencing, (2) teacher inservice training for parent-involvement, (3) parent curriculum planning committee, (4) training or hiring parent-teacher program coordinator, (5) parent-as-teacher inservice program, (6) secondary subject matter training program for parents, and (7) parent-as-partner training program.

A school district which falls in the Moderate-Active Parent Involvement Program category is Emporia Unified School District #253 (Kansas). With the deluge of educational reports published during 1983 and 1984, the school district responded with publicity related to the proposed reforms, programs, and new requirements. Emporia was no exception in examining and modifying its educational programs. However, most school districts have not dealt with a major area of public relations: homework. Every day teachers send a public relations message home to parents in the form of homework (LaConte, 1981).

Homework public relations consist of two leadership roles: the school administrators and the individual teachers.

The administrator's role

Administrators can use daily homework as a public relations tool by involving parents, students, community members, and educators in the process of formulating a building or district homework policy.

1. Conduct a parent survey. Administrators can conduct a general survey to determine parental opinions on a wide variety of topics. Emporia conducted a district-wide survey in the 1984-85 school year (Tompkins, 1985). The results of the survey have helped to give some future direction to the district. Since national reports called for more parental involvement, the school district's survey was a positive public relations event. Other sample survey questions are found in various district surveys conducted in Pennsylvania. ("Survey...", 1950; Study..., 1973)

2. Conduct a town meeting. Based upon the parental concerns found in the results of the community survey, a series of town meetings could be held. Depending upon the topic, the panel might consist of administrators, teachers, bus drivers, nurses, and security personnel who are prepared to inform and discuss with parents about district and/or building goals, objectives, and methods relating to a particular parental concern. Emporia found six areas of parental concern: homework, discipline, grading/report cards, drugs/alcohol, district-wide tests, and curriculum/texts. During the 1985-86 school year, six monthly town meetings were held on each of these topics. However, in order to deal specifically with the topic of homework, other steps in the process are necessary.

3. Meet with administrative staff. The principals, curriculum directors, and superintendents are the leaders of the district. This group should discuss homework findings, problems, and solutions. Parental concerns that were voiced in the survey and town meeting should be discussed. Where building level problems exist, homework proposals could be shared and immediately implemented at those building levels. For example, if staff members lack current information on homework, then a homework curriculum kit might be suggested. The kit might contain current homework booklets, homework research articles, and homework guidelines. This kit would be placed in the libraries of the attendance centers. Thus, staff would have immediate access to recent homework literature.

4. Form a homework committee. The next step is that administrators can set up a homework committee which is composed of parents, students, community members, and educators (Grossnickle, 1983). The committee studies the survey results, administrative proposals, and homework literature (Foyle & Bailey, 1984). The committee recommends a building and/or district homework policy. A good example of a district plan is found in the Caddo Parish Schools, Louisiana ("Information", 1984).

5. Conduct a homework survey. Administrators and the homework committee can conduct a specific homework survey to determine teachers', parents', and students' opinions on the topic of homework. National reports called for more homework. Research (Keith, 1982) indicated a connection between time spent on homework and student grades. With these two elements in mind, the homework survey can be a positive response to the reports and a public relations event in the community. Survey questions should include the following items: time required to complete homework, length of homework assignments, locations for doing homework, grading homework, need for help on homework, frequency of homework assignments, and the types of homework used. Sample questions are found in district surveys conducted in Texas (Homework practices..., 1983), and California (Homework surveys..., 1983). After conducting the homework survey, the homework committee examines and analyzes the survey results. Other survey results may be considered (Friesen, 1978).

6. Develop a homework policy. When the U.S.S.R. launched Sputnik I in 1957, a cry for educational reform followed. (Strother, 1984) In order to excel, students received more homework without a great deal of concern for coherent homework policies (Bond & Smith, 1965). The report, A Nation at Risk, has the same educational effect (National Commission, 1983). However, administrators with the help of parents can develop a consistent homework policy which leads to excellence. The homework committee determines the requirements for homework and the needed types of homework (Foyle, & Bailey, 1985). Finally, the committee recommends a district homework policy. Some sample homework policies are found in Pennsylvania (Study on homework..., 1973) and in California (Homework policies..., 1983)

The teacher's role

Daily public relations can start immediately with the individual student and teacher. One of the biggest problems with homework is that students often copy homework assignments in a haphazard manner. Parents cannot understand the student's homework assignment and often the student cannot understand it either. This situation may lead to misunderstandings between the teacher and student and the teacher and parent.

American history teachers, Ann North and Harvey Foyle, conducted a homework classroom experiment at Emporia High School (Foyle, 1985). Using a single sheet homework format, students completed their homework on this paper which was clearly stated, appeared differently from other notes, and was done in a uniform manner (Appendix B). Homework became a communication device between parents and teachers. The parents knew exactly what homework was expected and could identify the homework sheets under this procedure.

Foyle & Bailey (1985) found that homework did increase student achievement when the homework was regularly assigned, clearly stated, regularly collected, promptly graded, and promptly returned. Regularly assigned homework requires that students spend additional time on course subjects in a consistent manner. Clearly stated homework assignment sheets help students understand what is expected in the homework. These types of clearly stated homework assignments give parents a positive image of the educational process and allow parents to help students with homework. Regularly collected homework indicates to the student that the homework is important and is necessary to the course of study. Promptly graded homework gives almost immediate feedback to the teacher in terms of the student's understanding of subject matter. Promptly returned homework gives almost immediate feedback to the student in terms of any errors of thinking or understanding of the course content. This process would take a minimum of three days. In the most rapid and ideal succession of events, homework would be assigned on the first day, collected on the second day, and returned on the third day. With this volume of homework going home to parents, administrators and teachers can use homework as a positive public relations tool. By following these homework guidelines, homework can be a bridge between the school and home as well as a positive daily public relations package.

The parent's role

A suggested high-active parent involvement program would involve parents in a variety of ways. How can the school district help to involve parents? The school district can provide parents with a checklist so that the parents know that the school district is interested in parent involvement (Appendix C). The checklist would be supported by district, attendance center, and teacher involvement and preparation. Research and experience tend to support the checklist items as important for a good parent school relationship. If each item is answered by a yes response, then there is good communication between the parent and the school at all levels. If each item on the checklist were supported by the school district so that parents could respond with a yes, then a human relations bridge would exist between the school and the home. This suggested high-active parent involvement program would take a great commitment on the part of a school district.

Conclusion

The concept of parent involvement in the school curriculum has been evolving over a period of years. As schools become more sophisticated in the education of children, they must become correspondingly more sophisticated in working with that child's parents. The benefits can be enormous for both the school and parents. It has become increasingly evident that the school must take a leadership role in pointing the direction for greater parent involvement. Schools can not afford the luxury of assuming a passive stance in parental involvement. They must create new programs and reorganize the school leadership structure to accommodate parental involvement as schools move from the Low-Passive Parent Involvement Program through the Moderate-Active Parent Involvement Program to the High-Active Parent Involvement Program. The strategies noted in this paper are indicative of the belief that greater parental involvement will lead to greater student achievement and positive attitudes toward the school and the teacher.

A High-Active Parent Involvement Program involves administrators, teachers, parents, and students. One part of that program is the daily "public relations package" known as homework. Homework is a human relations bridge between the possibilities of the school and the realities of the home.

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Appendix A

Parent Involvement Continuum

Low-Passive Parent Involvement Program	Moderate-Active Parent Involvement Program	High-Active Parent Involvement Program
Report Cards	Report Cards	Report Cards
Reporting Period with School-Based Conferences	Reporting Period with School-Based Conferences	Reporting Period with School-Based Conferences
Parent-Teacher Organization	Parent-Teacher Organization	Parent-Teacher Organization
Occasional Telephone Conferencing	Regular Telephone Conferencing	Regular Telephone Conferencing
	Parent-aide Program	Parent-aide Program
	Teacher-prescribed Parent Home Activities	Teacher-prescribed Parent Home Activ.
		Home-based Teacher-Parent Conferencing
		Teacher Inservice Training for Parent Involvement
		Parent Curriculum Planning Committee
		Training or Hiring Parent-Teacher Coordinator
		Parents-as-Teacher Inservice Training Program
		Secondary Subject Matter Training Program
		Parent-as-Teaching Partner Training Program

Appendix B

Homework
Chapter 13
Section 2

Name_____
Date_____
Hour_____

Directions

Read Chapter 13, Section 2, pp. 208-210.
Write your responses to the identify and questions 1 & 2, p. 210.

Appendix C

Checklist for Parents

Answer each question with a yes or a no.

1. Does the school district have a homework policy?

2. Does the district provide copies of the subject matter scope and sequence so that parents can follow the course content as it is taught and homework is given?

3. Does the district or attendance center provide homework help such as a telephone hotline, open library study, tutoring, or other help?

4. Does the attendance center have a homework policy?

5. Does the student's teacher have a homework policy?

6. Does the student's teacher use a variety of homework types?

   a. Does the student's teacher use preparation homework?

   b. Does the student's teacher use practice homework?

   c. Does the student's teacher use extension homework?

   d. Does the student's teacher use creative homework?

7. Does the teacher have specific homework guidelines?

   a. Is the homework regularly assigned?

   b. Is the homework clearly stated?

   c. Is the homework regularly collected or requested?

   d. Is the homework promptly graded?

   e. Is the homework promptly returned?

8. Does the teacher let parents know when homework is given, through parent notes, class newsletter, or school letters?

9. Does the parent help the student with homework?

10. Does the parent, a brother or sister, or other person know enough about the subject matter to help with homework?

11. Does the school offer help with homework outside of regular school hours?

12. Is the student given homework appropriate to the student's grade level?

    a. In grades k-5, is homework limited and used for makeup work, extension, and creativity?

    b. In grades 6-8, is the homework appropriate to the subject, student time available, and types of homework?

    c. In grades 9-12, is the homework appropriate to the course, student time available, and relate to one of the purposes of homework?

13. Does the student have a specific place to study, specific time to study, and limited interruptions in study so as to minimize stress?

14. Does the parent show interest and ask whether there is homework tonight?

15. Does the parent provide the student with the discipline to complete the homework rather than not doing it?

16. Does the parent have a positive attitude toward school, teacher, subject, and homework?

17. Does the parent take part in school activities as they occur so as to show the importance of school in the student's life?

18. Does the parent understand that the school is their school and exists for their child?